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SUBJECT: DEATHS BY LIGHTNING STRIKE SPIKE IN 2009

¶1. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has recorded a sharp uptick in the number of lightning strike fatalities in 2009, according to government officials and local media. 95 individuals have died from lightning strikes so far this year, compared to 90 in all of 2008. Five individuals were killed on June 19 alone. Dr. Seth Vannareth, Director of the Department of Meteorology (DOM) in the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MOWRAM) attributed this year's marked increase to rising temperatures, increasing use of technology such as mobile phones, and low public awareness of the dangers of lightning storms.

¶2. According to Dr. Seth, surface temperatures on land and at sea have increased slightly this year when compared to 2008. These higher temperatures have led to an increase in the development of cumulonimbus clouds, which are tall, dense formations associated with thunderstorms and other intense weather events. Dr. Seth said that storm fronts made up of cumulonimbus clouds can often form quickly and are difficult to predict. These formations can lie as low as 164 feet above the earth, raising the risk of lightning strikes to individuals caught underneath. The DOM tries to issue weather warnings whenever possible, but there is no formalized system for storm alerts to reach the public.

¶3. Dr. Seth also speculated that there had been more lightning strike deaths this year because many victims were using mobile phones when they were hit. According to many scientists, the notion that phones and other small, metal objects attract lightning when carried outside is a myth. However, some researchers argue that if an individual is carrying such an object when they are hit, that object or device can cause severe burns or other injuries, which could lead to higher instances of death. Dr. Seth also noted that some of this year's lightning strike victims were farmers standing in pools of water that had been hit.

¶4. When asked if the average Cambodian would know what to do when caught outside in a lightning storm, Dr. Seth acknowledged that the public is generally unaware of common safety precautions, such as avoiding trees and bodies of water. The DOM began a public awareness campaign to try to address this gap, but budget shortfalls have limited the campaign's effectiveness. The DOM printed 3,000 brochures for nationwide distribution, but Dr. Seth estimated that about 10,000 more are needed. She said there is no formal outreach through television or radio.

¶5. COMMENT. The tragedy of the increase in lightning strike deaths in Cambodia is that it is largely preventable. The DOM addresses the issue as best it can, but given its resource constraints the DOM can do little more than react to weather events. With a relatively small commitment to financially and/or technically support publishing of additional brochures and implementation of a television and radio campaign to highlight lightning safety precautions, the USG could help to prevent unnecessary future deaths

and show a commitment to the well-being of Cambodia's majority-rural population. END COMMENT.

RODLEY